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Book Review

FINOLA KENNEDY, 2001. *Cottage to Crèche: Family Change in Ireland*, Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2001, pp. 302. Price: €30.47

Officially, huge importance was attached to the family in twentieth century Ireland, the most obvious manifestation of this is in the Constitution of 1937 where it is afforded the status of a moral institution with inalienable and imprescriptible rights. In practice however, there was a huge gulf between the ideals and the reality. In this marvellous book, Finola Kennedy has shown that ultimately, the ideal constitutional notion of the family, particularly towards the end of the century, could not remain above and beyond economic realities. This book is one of the most significant to have been published on modern Irish history because despite its place at the centre of Irish life and official rhetoric, there has been little sustained examination of the family as an institution. This is all the more surprising, given the author's contention that change in the various dimensions of Irish family life amounted to a social revolution within an economic revolution, as Ireland, for so long the exception to normal European demographic trends, began to mirror the trends of its European neighbours.

The statistics contained in this survey give some indication of the massive changes witnessed in the course of the twentieth century. By the end of the century, births to unmarried mothers stood at 30 per cent of the total – rising from 1,600 in 1921 to over 15,000 in 1998. In 1921 the rate of maternal mortality was 4.8 per 1,000; by 1994 Ireland had the lowest rate of maternal mortality in the world. The infant mortality rate fell from 99 to 6 per 1,000 live births between 1900 and 1995. In 1991, 80 per cent of homes were owner occupied, compared with 53 per cent in 1946. By the end of the century 40 per cent of married women were in the workforce compared to only 5 per cent in 1966. Between 1975 and 1995 the probability of female marriage declined by one-third, from 90 to 60 per cent. Of those attending clinics for sexually transmitted diseases at the end of the century 32 per cent were teenagers.

Central to Kennedy's thesis is that economic influences were more important in the long term than the social and moral teaching of the Catholic Church, a significant challenge to more traditional interpretations of the power and influence of religion. Also notable is her assertion that an emphasis on mothers staying in the home was not a philosophy unique to Ireland – the ground breaking Beveridge Report in England which paved the way for the welfare state in post-war Britain emphasised that "in the next thirty years housewives as mothers have vital work to do in ensuring the adequate continuance of the British race and of British ideals in the world" (p. 5)

All the pillars of Irish society whose actions and beliefs affected family policy are analysed – the church, politicians, media and the medical and legal professions.

Crucially, there are key insights into the class divisions operating in Irish life. This book also makes an important contribution to the history of Irish women and uncovers many of the "hidden Irelands", by drawing attention to "features of family life that are frequently overlooked, for example, how mothers were often involved in earning the family living, even though this might not be recorded in the official statistics." (p. 59).

Elements of the history of popular culture are also examined particularly in the context of the lifestyles and reading habits of women of different classes. There are also many timely reminders of the inaccuracy of the assumptions that are made about religion and the media – in the same year that the Irish Constitution was introduced the supposedly liberal and Protestant *Irish Times*, articulated its opposition to female participation in the labour force – … "some day, please Heaven! the nation will be so organised that work will be available for every man, so that he may marry and assumes the burdens of a home and for every woman until she embarks on her proper profession – which is marriage" (p. 82) Many trade unionists (including female) had similar views.

Of course, what was believed in private was often not articulated in public – Margaret MacEntee, wife of Sean, a senior Fianna Fáil Minister for much of the 1930s and 1940s, according to her daughter, was highly critical of the status afforded to women under the Constitution and "on women's issues she had no confidence in male politicians – ever. She had been the main breadwinner. My father had been in and out of jail. *Her* money kept the household going" (p. 85) Whatever about controversially defining the woman's sphere as strictly domestic (and many feminists of the 1920s and 1930s were strong proponents of motherhood) women in practice were not rewarded for staying in the home. For much of the twentieth century tax and social welfare policy was based on the idea of the male breadwinner and Kennedy gives due attention to the various legal challenges of the latter part of the century in relation to these and other issues, and the significance of the introduction of the Succession Act of 1965 safeguarding women's property rights. A measure of the degree of social change is that by the end of the century much more attention was being given to the failure to uphold the rights of deserted husbands.

Kennedy also interviewed key politicians, all now retired, who played a major role in the shaping of family policy and they give interesting insights into how change came about or was frustrated. Those interviewed were Patrick Hillery (first Commissioner of the European Union for Social Affairs) and three ex-Taoisigh – Liam Cosgrave, Garret FitzGerald and Charles Haughey. But there were many catalysts for change other than politics and the law, as Kennedy demonstrates in Chapter 5. Much attention is rightly given to the Women's National Health Association; the Irish Countrywomen's Association and the Irish Housewives' Association. As the author wrote a minority report of the Second Commission on the Status of Women, she is well placed to detail the demands for changes and increases in child benefit towards the end of the century.

She also effectively analyses the influence of the media, particularly the RTE soap-opera the *The Riordans*, and notes that "the programme introduced one of the most sensitive issues in rural family life – the links between property, farm ownership and marriage at the very time of the debate on the Succession Bill" in 1965. Fascinating aspects of the social history of modern Ireland are also included in a very strong chapter on the role and status of children, around which much contemporary debate has revolved given the shocking revelations of recent years. But as is demonstrated, the Carrigan Report on Sexual Offences in 1931 had drawn attention to the abuse of children and the manner in which the judicial process operated to the detriment of the

young. It was duly suppressed, but Kennedy's observations highlight the untenability of the idea that very few people knew what was going on.

The truth is that after Independence children were not afforded the same status they had been given in the Democratic Programme of the first Dáil in 1919 which had placed the care of children as "the first duty of the republic" whereas the Constitution of 1937 sought to protect "the family" from interference by the state. Childcare of course is still a very topical issue – indeed many of the themes raised in this book are still matters of the utmost concern to contemporary families – the widespread demand for childcare as a state service is of the late twentieth century belief that responsibility for care does not rest solely with the mother, a view far removed from the concerns of the First Commission on the Status of Women, which as Kennedy points out, viewed it as "a decidedly second-best option" (p. 147).

Kennedy also gives a sophisticated synopsis of the role of the Catholic Church, rightly urging against an analysis of Irish society that is based on a rigid clerical-lay divide, while allowing for the fact that many of the flock ignored the directives of their pastors. Sean O'Faolain, for example, pointed out many years ago that the worst censors in Cork were among the laity. The book is also a reminder of the danger of seeing the history of the Catholic Church solely in terms of its focus on sexual morality or the lack of it, and she comments that "the effects of religious tradition on behaviour in Ireland have never been systematically studied" (p. 166). She also makes good use of the state papers in the National Archives to detail the background to the introduction of prohibition of contraception, and traces the issue up to more recent times when according to Garret FitzGerald, the church's official position was "non-credible in rational terms" (p. 164).

In looking at the wider influence of religion she suggests Joe Lee has not given enough credit to the impact of Catholic social thought, seen to be influential in the compilation of amongst other things, the Banking Commission Report of the 1930s, and cautions that when examining the Mother and Child controversy, the role of the medical profession should not be minimised. This was as much a class conflict as anything else. The Catholic extremist James McPolin, for example, not only excoriated the notion of the state interfering in the medical affairs of private families, but also objected to the scheme "on the grounds that it obliterated a whole section of private practice for doctors" (p. 198). In lurching to the left on social issues, the Church in the early 1970s was vocal in establishing the idea of a minimum income guaranteed by the state. Not all however, will agree with her conclusion that with the exception of the Mother and Child Scheme "church influence did not operate as a result of any direct pressure from the hierarchy upon the legislature; rather because Catholic social teaching was part of the air breathed by the legislators".

This is somewhat exaggerated given the utter pragmatism and lack of ideological debate in mid-twentieth century Irish politics. Kennedy admits as much in Chapter 9, which is a good survey of successive governments' responses to the needs of the family. Included are such issues as Widow's and Orphan's Pensions (1935) and Children's Allowances (1944). The latter were saluted by the redoubtable James Dillon, the first Dáil Deputy to raise the issue in 1938, but predictably opposed by J. J. McElligott, Secretary to the Department of Finance, who wanted the state to assume responsibility only for those who were destitute. For Dillon, the fact that it would not be means tested, or in the form of coupons, meant that "it bolts and bars the door against the bureaucrat" (p. 217). In an astonishing display of hypocrisy, Lemass rejected the

suggestion of the young Liam Cosgrave that the allowance should be paid to the mother, making a mockery of the provisions of the Constitution about supporting women in the home.

It was not until 1973 that an Unmarried Mother's Allowance was introduced, which the author insists in ideological terms "was like stepping on to a new planet", while the Family Planning Act of 1979 raised further questions about the timidity of politicians. Indeed, as she notes, throughout the century governments were happy to avoid taking responsibility for the welfare of families "until stimulated to do so by some element of public demand, or left with no option due to a decision of the courts". And it is still going on – as I write, Kathryn Sinnott, the Cork disability rights campaigner, is anxiously awaiting the results of an election recount, forced into politics by the failure of the state to safeguard the educational rights of the disabled.

Not only historians, but economists, sociologists, lawyers, legislators and general readers owe a huge debt to Finola Kennedy who has researched and explored so many avenues and opened many new doors in this timely, fascinating, and brilliant book.

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